TUDOR POLITICAL CULTURE

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Introduction

The difference between politics and political culture is essentially the difference between political action and the codes of conduct, formal and informal, governing those actions. A history of the former treats the players of the game, a history of the latter, what the players presume the nature and limits of their game to be. Ideally, the two histories should be written as one: political 'reality' is by definition a compound of both.

If the reconstruction of lost political 'realities' comprehends the recovery of political cultures, the challenge for the historian lies in discovering the relevant cultural contexts. The subject matter of 'high culture' provides some obvious avenues of approach: political theory, whether the product of court propagandists or aspirants to office, a body of writing encompassing in particular words of advice and counsel offered to princes; chronicles, tracts and histories embodying social, religious, economic and political commentary, witting and unwitting; evidence of literacy, the dissemination of printed materials and the contents of educational curricula; poetry, prose and dramatic literature; artistic images, architectural programmes and decorative schemes in the fine arts; coronations, civic processions and entertainments of all types, including especially tournaments, masques, pageants, entries, past-times, disguisings and other 'revels' of the royal court.[1]

Of course the foregoing list hardly exhausts the range of possible approaches to the political cultures of the Tudor élite. Public and private ceremonies for the dead offer a potentially rich vein of material, since royal and aristocratic funerals were in a certain sense rituals of socio-political power and status.[2] The trick lies in how to 'read' the extant evidence of the rites and symbols of heraldic funerals, how to understand what contemporaries meant by the form and performance of their obsequies. A case in point is the problem of interpreting the funeral (29 June 1537) of Henry Percy, sixth earl of Northumberland, a peer

[1] John Guy has usefully surveyed numerous aspects of these fields in a chapter on 'Political Culture' in his *Tudor England* (Oxford, 1988), ch. 15, pp. 408–36.

[2] For an introductory survey (with a select bibliography) by an art historian, see Nigel Llewellyn, *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual c. 1500 – c. 1800* (1991).

best remembered for the sale and granting away of much of his property and the disinheritance of his brother, his only heir, in favour of Henry VIII at the time of the Pilgrimage of Grace. Using the heralds' account of the rite, Gerald Broce and Richard Wunderli thought that Percy's seemingly impromptu internment away from his family's ancestral lands and in the absence of his household officials reflected the triumph of Tudor centralism over the Percys' regional family interests, and so was 'a performance in changed political relations' between Crown and nobility.[3] R. W. Hoyle questioned this by noting that Broce and Wunderli had failed to consider whether the form of the funeral fulfilled the deceased's wishes, for there remains the possibility that, consistent with the pattern of Percy's life, a life of debt, illness, and attempts to provide lands to an affinity who were not his kin, his respectful, arguably well-ordered burial represented 'a definitive rejection of family and status'. A peer's funeral marked 'the occasion at which the estate passed from generation to generation. With a corpse but no heir and little family, a full funeral would have lacked its most vital actor.' Percy was not the victim of Tudor centralism or intimidation; the Crown actually tried to keep his estate together. His funeral logically punctuated Percy's self-effacing, tragic career.[4]

Percy's quiet, obscurely staged obsequies were clearly the exception to a funereal tradition of heraldic display, an aristocratic tradition designed to glorify an individual's knightly status in a society of formally recognized order, rank, and degree. Did Sir Philip Sidney's costly, magnificently mounted funeral procession in the streets of London symbolically subvert the natural order of Elizabethan society? A New Historicist's notion that it did is attacked below (chapter 7) by James Day. Day's argument, which properly situates Sidney's rites in the only context which could be considered relevant, that of heraldic funereal symbolism, makes fresh use of contemporary visual and literary sources as well as the official records of the heralds who organized Sidney's procession.

Day's methodology, which aims at an historically accurate reading of the iconography of honour, shows by how much the history of political culture is an exercise in reconstructing a particular mentality. Historians of the institutions of Tudor central government are not usually given to writing such history. David Dean shows (in chapter 10), however, that if they are to understand the nature of those institutions most fully they must learn to 'see' parliament, for example, as contemporaries would have done, and that the way to this end is the study of parliament as both image and ritual. Although the study of sixteenth-century English institutional rituals is hardly new, it is a study still in its infancy. Thus, while books and articles abound on the making of bills and acts, Dean's contribution is the first to consider how and why the ceremonies of the opening

[3] Gerald Broce and Richard M. Wunderli, 'The Funeral of Henry Percy, sixth earl of Northumberland', *Albion*, 22 (1990): 215.

[4] R. W. Hoyle, 'Henry Percy, sixth earl of Northumberland, and the fall of the House of Percy, 1527–1537', in G. W. Bernard (ed.), *The Tudor Nobility* (Manchester, 1992), p. 200.

and closing of a parliament were integral to the business done there, and what visual representations of parliamentary sessions tell us about the institutional mentalities of MPs. This is a new type of parliamentary history, one which makes use of some rare, previously unpublished contemporary images of parliamentary sessions (plate 56, for example).

Although they were non-ceremonial, parliamentary elections may also be classified as political rituals of the Tudor nation. By asking what both electors and the men elected understood those rituals of election (or, following Mark Kishlansky, 'selection') to mean in the reign of Elizabeth I, Norman Jones (in chapter 9) has opened up another window into the political 'mind' of the age. Sir Geoffrey Elton has said that the constitutional revolution of the 1530s transformed 'a community of partly independent orders within one country' into 'a unitary realm where one law ruled both monarch and subjects . . .' If the result was the triumph of parliamentary law, i.e. the sovereignty of the king-in-parliament, 'it was in the parliaments of Elizabeth I that the problems now raised and the opportunities now offered first came to be a major concern in political life'.[5] This being so, it should be important to know what Elizabethan MPs thought they were doing in parliament, how, as Jones has said, they conceived of the nature of their representation and the place of parliament in their political culture. On whose behalf did MPs speak? Sixteenth-century political speech had so thoroughly absorbed the language of religion that on important matters of debate appeals to God might be supposed to have informed the wisdom of those who were speaking. But 'the departure of divinity from government', in Jones's apt phrase, left the way open to appeals to individual conscience, and so undermined traditional assumptions about the social basis of government, assumptions which presumed that in a divinely ordained social order of rank and degree, only the well-born enjoyed a natural right of counsel to the queen. Here was a revolution in political mentalities, in attitudes towards the authority for the making of statute, a revolution underscoring the importance of the study of Elizabethan parliaments and the political vocabulary of Elizabethan parliamentary speeches.

If the law-making roles of Elizabethan MPs had been immeasurably enhanced by the Reformation, and if in the making of law parliament-men looked less to God than to their own consciences for a basis of right, there arose in practice a potential conflict between a queen of divinely ordained office possessed of real prerogatives and powers, including the power to summon and control parliaments, and a parliament representing free men, a community whose consent in parliament was required for the laws which embodied supreme authority. The conflict, as David Harris Sacks shows (in chapter 11) was made manifest in the parliamentary debates over royal patents of monopoly. The language of those

[5] G. R. Elton, '*Lex Terrae Victrix*: The Triumph of Parliamentary Law in the Sixteenth Century', in D. M. Dean and N. L. Jones (eds.), *The Parliaments of Elizabethan England* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 35, 36.

debates, and the bodily gestures of those who participated, including Queen Elizabeth's gestures in her famous 'Golden Speech' of 30 November 1601, need to be understood as part of what Sacks calls the accepted rituals of parliamentary accommodation. In the case of monopolies, the political culture of parliamentary debate employed, in Sacks's words, a distinctive 'language of benefits', the content, tone, and form of delivery of which explain why those who spoke it could accept by its terms a resolution of the apparent conflict between the royal prerogative and the interests of those who had not given their consent in a matter (they said) touching the livelihoods and property of the queen's free-born subjects.

Some members of parliament reckoned that on great matters of state theirs was a *right* of counsel, a mode of thinking, for example, that underlay Peter and Paul Wentworth's demand for full freedom of parliamentary speech. But as John Guy so tellingly argues (in chapter 12), none of the languages of political discourse in early modern England recognized parliament as a council in which members enjoyed such a right, and even if the queen had accepted such a view, she still might have rejected the Wentworths' logic on the grounds (as Guy says) 'that counselling was a duty not a right', even in the privy council. No one denied that princes needed good counsel. The question was by whom and on what terms, a question that the Reformation made more insistent, since, as Guy notes, it was the view of some common lawyers that the royal supremacy could only be exercised in parliament, that the queen's *imperium* was limited by parliamentary consent. Debates about whether parliament was the natural locus of *consilium* turned on the meanings of such words, meanings derived from their usage in different rhetorical traditions, the feudal-baronial and the humanist-classical. By clarifying the metaphors of 'counsel' in use under the Tudors and early Stuarts, Guy is able to show why the political rituals of linguistic accommodation discussed by Sacks broke down by 1642, why the vocabulary of 'counsel' failed to provide words sufficient 'for the orderly conduct of politics'.

Parliamentary rituals of accommodation, based fundamentally on an acceptable rhetoric of 'counsel', were designed to produce the harmony that ideally was supposed to characterize the relations of king, lords, and commons. In practice, of course, the exercise of power at the top reveals patterns of control, deference, and manipulation, not to mention the possibilities for exploitation always inherent in social and political hierarchies. Similar patterns of power were to be found in local politics. In chapter 5 Bob Tittler reminds us that after the 1540s, urban governments were becoming more oligarchic and structurally hierarchical. The men who enjoyed this power were often political newcomers, merchants, and master craftsmen without hereditary status, court ties or great regional patrons. Their new secular civic ceremonies were designed to create deference and respect, and their new buildings, especially their town halls,

became centres for the display of their newly assumed dignity and authority. Architecturally and decoratively, they fabricated, in Tittler's words, an 'environment of civic hegemony': here was a new material culture of urban power. The breadth and depth of Tittler's researches in the architectural and written remains of this world leave no doubt about the nature of a changed political outlook among the governors of England's towns in the century after the Henrician Reformation.

One aspect of that changed outlook had to do with the social basis of a town's representation in parliament. As Norman Jones notes below, new urban leaders eagerly sought parliamentary franchises for reasons of political prestige, prestige sometimes gained not by sending resident townsmen to parliament, but by securing a great landed patron whose choice of an outside client for the town's seat in parliament would in turn secure for the mayor and aldermen access to regional networks of patronage among the gentry. This is a story of the penetration of the country by the town and *vice versa*, but one aspect of a political culture linking town and country to the court. Such linkage is illuminated in Bill Tighe's discussion (in chapter 6) of the official career of John Scudamore, a Herefordshire country gentleman who was active in his county's affairs in the 1570s and 1580s and who simultaneously held the offices of steward of Hereford city and gentleman pensioner at the court of Elizabeth I. Basing his account on Scudamore's heretofore untapped letters, Tighe builds up a picture of 'the great web' of patronage that connected Scudamore, via men like Sir James Croft, his father-in-law, and Croft's patron, the earl of Leicester, to the mayor and aldermen of Hereford, on the one hand and, on the other, Elizabeth I's privy chamber where his wife, the queen's kinswoman, served as chamberer. Scudamore's dual career as countryman and courtier reveals (in Tighe's words) the 'compenetration' of court influence and country authority, the dynamic basis of what Tighe calls 'the reciprocal nature of the relationship between courtiership and country status'. Within and between the circles of Scudamore's patrons and clients one sees in microcosm nearly the full extent of the social basis of high political culture in the Elizabethan era.

Scudamore's kin provided the keys to his access to offices in local and central government; the greater one's kinfolk or the closer their proximity to the person of the monarch, the better were one's chances of advancement. In aristocratic court society, family connections, and not ideology or faction, arguably define the best context for an appreciation of political action: this is the essence of Retha Warnicke's challenging analysis (in chapter 2) of the circumstances of the rise and fall of Anne Boleyn. Rejecting views which rely on the operations of 'Aragonese' or 'evangelical' factional interests, Warnicke shows that the history of the ties between the Boleyn and Howard families framed Anne's fortunes. However one interprets the evidence used to explain Anne's execution, it is clear that Warnicke's explication of the Boleyn-Howard affinity, which is properly

set against the background of histories of English landed families, must serve as the starting point of all future accounts of one of the most sensational episodes in Tudor court politics.

In the coronation pageants staged for her on the occasion of her entry into London (29 May 1533), Anne Boleyn was repeatedly likened to St Anne and her daughter, the Virgin Mary, scenarios based on the late-medieval tradition of praising queens consort as types of holy women. In politics as in officially sponsored spectacles, the Tudors were users and makers of tradition. If in the dramatic literature of the pageant Anne was invested with the familiar religious attributes of a succession of great queens, in politics she none the less embodied a revolutionary break with the past. In his penetrating study of royal iconography generated after that break, John King (in chapter 4) shows how printed and painted images of the Tudor sovereigns, some officially sanctioned, others privately commissioned, reflected the ecclesiastical and doctrinal changes wrought successively by the Henrician Reformation, Edwardian protestantism, the Marian reaction, and the accession of Elizabeth I. King's study, which exploits title-page illustrations in the editions of three Bibles, selected woodcuts in John Foxe's *Actes and Monumentes* (the editions of 1563 and 1570), and illustrative material in Elizabethan devotional literature (among other visual sources), is the first systematically to reveal the surprising thematic continuities as well as changes in the new visual media of sixteenth-century politico-religious propaganda.

It has been said that the woodcuts and engravings in the frontispieces of the earliest Bishops' Bibles (1568, 1569) discussed by King constituted 'one of the most influential of all portrait forms of expression', the assumption being that since such Bibles were placed in every parish church, 'they must have been seen by almost every subject'.[6] Whether this is true in fact cannot be known; more certain is the existence of 'an almost universal cult of the royal image in Elizabethan England', a cult the popular relics of which could be seen around many necks. In Queen Elizabeth's day these were the cheap metallic medals 'with rings for suspension [which] were the lower-class equivalent of the cameos and miniatures worn by the upper orders'.[7]

Of course Elizabeth I did not invent this cult. If anyone did it was her grandfather, Henry VII,[8] who, as I have tried to show (in chapter 3), developed a new programme for the visual representation of the royal person. It is surely of psychological interest that the profile he ordered stamped on some of his coins is the first artistic likeness of an English king in that medium (plate 7c). Of greater interest are the images of him in 'majesty', for these appear for the first time in a variety of artistic media and almost invariably show him wearing the arched 'imperial' crown of England. Much has been written about the intellectual

[6] Roy Strong, *Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (Oxford, 1963), p. 30. [7] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[8] The best introduction to the ritualistic and symbolic settings for the projection of the royal image is Sydney Anglo, *Images of Tudor Kingship* (1992).

origins of English imperial kingship, a type of sovereignty first defined in law in 1533–34. The burden of my argument in chapter 3 is that those origins must be made to comprehend the history of the iconography of the closed crown, a royally sponsored artistic tradition dating from the reign of Henry V. Henry VIII made powerful use of this tradition from the very moment of his coronation; it should be clear now to whom he owed his 'vision' of the majestic symbolism of 'imperial' kingship.

At eighteen, when he came to the throne, Henry VIII wanted nothing so much as to be known as one who could match the valour of his namesake at Agincourt, and so in France in 1513 an English King Henry once again would lay siege to French walls and towns. There can be no doubt about how Henry VIII viewed Henry V's legacy in France. But, as Tom Mayer demonstrates (in chapter 1) in a powerful reappraisal of the jurisdictional implications of Henry VIII's first French war, the English occupation of Tournai, though short-lived (1513–17), anticipated the revolution of 1533–34, not a revived Lancastrian *imperium*. Mayer's analysis, which draws heavily on continental jurisprudential sources, should forever change the way we think about the theory and practice of early Tudor kingship.

Mayer's discussion of the legal ramifications of Henry VIII's administration of Tournai frames one of the great problems of early Tudor statecraft, why the king launched three strategically myopic and financially disastrous wars against France (1513, 1522–23, and 1544). Exclusively political explanations of the origins of these conflicts – that in 1513 a factious war party in the king's council pushed Henry into hostilities, that the balance within a new European state 'system' dictated England's role *vis-à-vis* France, etc. – fail to recognize how Henry conceived of the need for war in the first place. Honour, not reasons of state, informed his thinking about the proper conduct of kings, and the king whose conduct was most worthy of study in this context was Henry V.[9]

Henry VIII's self-conscious, self-promoting efforts to emulate the behaviour of Henry V has allowed students of this subject the convenience of discounting the seriousness of the Tudor claim to the French throne, a claim which, because it appears to us to have been anachronistic, seemingly renders irrational Henry VIII's aim of recovering France upon his accession. The political culture of English chivalry explains this seeming unreason. 'Chivalry' describes not only the ethics of knightly conduct – an 'honourable' sensibility institutionalized, for example, in the Order of the Garter – but also feats of arms, and both, it is clear, directly influenced politics at the courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII.[10] Because fifteenth-century kings, including Henry VII, had nationalized the cult of chivalry, Henry VIII felt compelled to equal or surpass the most virtuous deeds

[9] Steven Gunn, 'The French Wars of Henry VIII', in J. Black (ed.), *The Origins of War in Early Modern Europe* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp. 28–51.

[10] Steven Gunn, 'Chivalry and the Politics of the Early Tudor Court', in Sidney Anglo (ed.), *Renaissance Chivalry* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1990), pp. 107–28.

of the Lancastrians and Yorkists. Knightly glory required that he choose war in 1513; he must become a warrior in the mould of Henry V in order to recover his inheritance, the French crown worn by Henry VI at St Denis. His ability to do so became 'a test of his place in national history'.[11]

In the hands of early-Tudor propagandists, English national history could be written as Tudor dynastic history with a purpose, and in the making of the myth of Tudor legitimacy, both Henry V and his son, Henry VI, were given providential parts. Shakespeare's use of the myth created another kind of history, one so powerful that in the popular imagination his history plays, all of which he wrote in the 1590s, could be read in places as patriotic expressions of the spirit of the nation. *Henry V* (1599), the last of the cycle, has certainly been read and performed as such. Thus the 'history' of the history plays, the product of a surpassingly brilliant Elizabethan imagination, conveys the essence of the Tudors' political genius, their ability to identify their kingship with their subjects' sense of nationhood and national purpose. Or so it would seem. In chapter 8, Peter Herman advances the provocative thesis that *Henry V* disproves this, that the play really attempts a 'deconstruction of Tudor legitimacy', that it subtly undercuts the legend of Henry V by giving voice to the undeniable socio-political tensions of the 1590s, to the recorded hostility of some Elizabethans to Elizabeth I and her government. Herman's argument obviously underscores the importance of reading the play in context. In his 'Introduction' to The New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of *King Henry V*, Andrew Gurr draws attention to one of the indisputable facts of English public life in the 1590s, the national preoccupation with war and the morality of war. Military manoeuvres overseas, war-weariness (as the decade progressed), fear of invasion, the presence of large numbers of troops in London, the unprecedented, enormous outpouring of published military propaganda, and books about strategy and tactics: these and the popular memory of Henry V and his victories (which was peaking in the 1590s) together form part of the essential background of the play.[12]

A systematic study of the political culture of Tudor warfare has yet to be written. In concluding this introduction, I should like to suggest how, for the reign of Henry VIII, such a study might treat the seamless links between politics and political culture, how it might reveal the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate phenomena, in this case Henrician chivalry, overseas war, 'imperial' iconography, and the Reformation of the 1530s. We have already seen how the culture of knightly honour explains the motivation of Henry's war policy in 1513. The martial aspects of that culture also explain the king's intensely personal interest in the waging of war. Henry's early, very lavish court tournaments (1509–11), jousts in which the athletic young king himself played the central part, were more than symbolic war-games; in a certain sense they were

[11] Gunn, 'The French Wars of Henry VIII', p. 39.
[12] *King Henry V*, ed. Andrew Gurr (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 1–2, 17, 23–5, 28.